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The Immortal Memory of George Eliot

Toast proposed at the George Eliot Birthday Lunch, 20 November 2005

I always used to be an admirer of Charles Lamb until I read recently his view of bluestockings or intellectual women writers: 'If she belonged to me I would lock her up and feed her on bread and water, till she left off writing poetry. A female poet, or female writer of any kind, ranks below an actress I think.' What a sentiment from a man who was a contemporary of Jane Austen and whose only other defence could have been that he didn't live long enough to read George Eliot!

I would like to begin by expressing my appreciation of the honour accorded me and the responsibility laid on me in being asked to propose this toast. I am very aware of the fact that I am in reality a substitute for Dame Gillian Beer, a truly distinguished scholar, and I freely confess that I have made absolutely no contribution to George Eliot studies throughout my career, although, unlike some who have attended the meetings and lunches of this fellowship over the years, I have actually read George Eliot. Nevertheless I must ask your indulgence for what I am about to say and if, like me, you are usually occupied at this time after Sunday lunch in a gentle sleep, please feel free...!

From the moment that I received the invitation to propose this toast I began to think very seriously about George Eliot and to search for any qualifications I might have for daring to address you who are so very knowledgeable about her, and after a short investigation I found a very suitable starting-point. 140 years ago in 1865, four years after the publication of *Silas Marner*, George Eliot who never forgot her origins, began her novel *Felix Holt, the Radical* with an imaginary coach journey across the Midlands of England 35 years earlier, in about 1830. At first she describes the typical traditional unchanging rural scene – but after a few pages the mood changes with the landscape, and she continues:

But as the day wore on the scene would change: the land would begin to be blackened with coal-pits, the rattle of hand looms to be heard in hamlets and villages. Here were powerful men walking queerly with knees bent outward from squatting in the mine, going home to throw themselves down in their blackened flannel and sleep through the daylight, then rise and spend much of their high wages at the alehouse with their fellows of the Benefit Club; here the pale eager faces of handloom-weavers, men and women, haggard from sitting up late at night to finish their week's work, hardly begun till the Wednesday. Everywhere the cottages and the small children were dirty, for the languid mothers gave their strength to the loom; pious Dissenting women, perhaps who took life patiently, and thought that salvation depended chiefly on predestination, and not at all on cleanliness. The gables of Dissenting chapels now made a visible sign of religion, and of a meeting-place to counter-balance the alehouse, even in the hamlets.

Mary Ann Evans, I believe, knew many of these working people very well and was very familiar with the hardships they endured.

And it was not an attractive area! She had already described it in one of her earliest excursions into fiction.

A flat ugly district this; depressing enough to look at even on the brightest days. The roads are black with coal-dust, the brick houses dingy with smoke; and at that time – the time of handloom weavers – every other cottage had a loom at its window, where you might see a pale, sickly-looking man or woman pressing a narrow chest against a board, and doing a sort of treadmill work with legs and arms. A troublesome district for a clergyman, at least to one who, like Amos Barton, understood the ‘cure of souls’ in something more than an official sense; for over and above the rustic stupidity furnished by farm-labourers, the miners brought obstreperous animalism, and the weavers an acrid Radicalism and Dissent.

And this is where I make my claim to the right to address you today, for Mary Ann was describing the districts where my own family lived and worked and whose members were her neighbours and exact contemporaries. She is describing my great-great-great-grandfather and his family – for Isaac Harris was a ‘navigator’ or ‘navvy’ who had worked on the Coventry Canal, and his son, Jacob who married Eliza Harvy at St Giles’ Church Exhall on 5 April 1847 was a weaver who lived and worked on Donkey Common. The lives of the handloom weavers so accurately described by Mary Ann Evans were the lives lived by my ancestors on both sides of my family, for all eight of my great-grandparents were at one time or another handloom weavers – either at home or in the ever-growing factories of Coventry and Foleshill. I well remember as a boy of about eight in 1942 being taken by my grandfather to an ancient cottage on Donkey Common where he informed me and the somewhat startled housewife who opened the door to us, that his own grandmother had lived there about a hundred years before.

Soon after 1850, Jacob and Eliza with their young family left the Bedworth Heath area and moved to Old Brook Lane (now Holbrook Lane) just over the level-crossing on the newly-opened Coventry-Nuneaton railway in Foleshill. Remember it was only a few years before this in the spring of 1841 that Mary Ann and her father had also moved away from Griff and taken up residence at Bird Grove just inside the city boundary on the Old Leicester Turnpike Road (later the Foleshill Road) running north from the centre of Coventry. This must have been a good ‘upward move’ for Robert Evans and his daughter, whereas the move to Foleshill was merely a desperate hunt for work in the case of Jacob Harris who died of consumption at the age of 37 a few years later. Jacob and Eliza’s first child, Henry, had been born in 1848. He was my great-grand-father, and it might interest you to know that one of his daughters, Eva, is still living at the age of 98 – two generations actually spanning 157 years!

So by the 1840s Mary Ann Evans was living just off the Foleshill Road and when she stepped out of Bird Grove and looked across the valley of the Springfield Brook she would have seen the recently created suburb of Hillfields with its rows of small terraced streets in which many of the Coventry weavers were now housed. Here in Adelaide Street lived a little boy of six, William Heatley, son of a weaver and his wife, and destined to become one himself. He was my maternal great-grandfather. When Mary Ann made a return journey to Griff along the Turnpike she would pass scores of weaver’s cottages in Lockhurst Lane, Carpenter’s Lane and

so on. Here in this same decade lived in lodgings a vagrant plush weaver from Oxfordshire, Tom Bloxham, who became my Mother's other grandfather, while nearby lived my Father's maternal grandfather, Edward Green and his first wife Ann, both weavers. Ann bore eight children, all of whom died in infancy or childhood before she herself died. Only when he married a second wife, Sarah, did Edward see a grown-up family as of his eight children by this marriage six reached their eighties – including my grandmother. So it is that Mary Ann Evans was not only a neighbour in Griff of the weavers of Exhall and Bedworth. When she moved to the borders of Coventry and Foleshill she came even closer to that community of which she was to write so graphically in years to come.

A century after Robert Evans's move to the Foleshill Road my parents my brother and I also lived about seventy five yards from that same road less than half a mile from Bird Grove. And if, as I have suggested, Robert Evans's move was distinctly 'upward' in its own way so was that of my own father – for he had become foreman of the machine shop at the British Piston Ring Company, was now earning £5 a week, and felt able to move from a terraced house in Durbar Avenue to a large semi-detached one in St Paul's Road.

I hope you will forgive the reminiscent mood and tone of this speech. I am, to use the words of a former prime minister, well into my anecdote and therefore claim your indulgence. However I do feel a real affinity with Mary Ann Evans before she ever became George Eliot, and my claim to justification for making this speech and proposing this toast is simply this: that while most of your previous speakers at this lunch have written *about* George Eliot, she actually wrote about my family, the weavers of North Warwickshire. It is a great thrill to know that they can be found in her books!

So now I invite those of you who have taken the opportunity to have a post-prandial nap to awaken, and all of you to rise and join with me as I submit the toast of the Immortal Memory of George Eliot.

Michael J. Harris
20 November 2005